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UNCLAS SAN JOSE 000428

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DEPT FOR WHA/CEN JASON MACK, WHA/EPSC AND DS/IP/WHA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [ASEC](#) [PINR](#) [CS](#)
SUBJECT: ANTI-CAFTA MARCH STRATEGIC VICTORY FOR GOCR

REF: A. 06 SAN JOSE 2431
[1](#)B. SAN JOSE 361

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) The most recent, and probably the last large anti-CAFTA protest march took place without incident on February 26. Participation was only slightly higher than a similar protest last October, and the event was generally peaceful. We judge the event to have been a tactical draw, in that both sides can claim success, but a strategic victory for the GOCR, since the protest changed nothing. CAFTA continues to wind its way through the torturous Costa Rican legislative process, which in itself presents challenges enough to ratification. END SUMMARY.

ANOTHER MONDAY, ANOTHER MARCH

[1](#)2. (U) On February 26, another anti-CAFTA march took place through the streets of San Jose, culminating with a rally in front of the national legislature. Various speakers, including ex-president Rodrigo Carazo (Unidad, 1978-1982), denounced the Agreement and called for the Arias administration to withdraw it from the legislative process and hold a full national dialogue on the issue. An umbrella group of labor unions, university students and professors, small farmers, and various social organizations participated, although estimated union participation was lower than during last October's protest (Ref A). The colorful, carnival-like event even featured small children wearing red buttons stating "Venezuela is a friend, CAFTA is the enemy." Citizen's Action Party (PAC) president Otton Solis joined the marchers as did the 17 legislators from his party and the two others opposed to CAFTA.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Estimates of the crowd size varied, as the protest got off to a languid start. The national police publicly estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 people eventually participated, while leading periodical "La Nacion" claimed 23,500 were involved. Our best sources in the security services estimated the crowd at 7,000, which puts this protest on par with, or only a little larger than, the October events, despite the use of buses by the opposition to bring in more protesters from outside San Jose. Even the media estimate (exaggerated on our view) was far fewer than the 50,000 protesters organizers had predicted.

PEACEFUL, AS PROMISED

14. (U) Protest organizers, generally kept their promise to keep the event peaceful (Ref B). The main highway between San Jose and Limon was blockaded briefly near Siquirres, but after the police arrived and a few arrests made (peacefully), the line of waiting tractor-trailers was moving again. Police had pre-positioned units at potential chokepoints around the country in anticipation of precisely this sort of action. Security was tight at the national legislature, with unarmed female police officers positioned along the metal barricades (politely but firmly) to discourage any attempt to enter the facility. Some union leaders warned the media that heavily-armed, Colombian-trained riot police were ready to swoop in on innocent marchers, but this wild claim found no traction. The legislature kept a regular schedule in the morning, but the afternoon plenary session was canceled due to the lack of a quorum. (Between legislators traveling, locked out of the building or protesting, only 35 were available. A quorum is 38.) The politicians quickly took advantage of their free afternoon, however, to work the crowd. Even legislators aligned with the GOCR congratulated the protesters for keeping the peace, and defended their right to protest. Public services were largely unaffected, and almost 80 percent of teachers were in class nationwide, about the same as during October's strike. There were no protests near the Embassy, nor were Embassy operations affected in any way.

LAST OF THE MARCHES

15. (U) As expected, both sides claimed victory and applauded Costa Rica's "exemplary democracy." As Minister of Government Arias made clear in a post-protest televised face-off with Eugenio Trejos (National Front for the Fight Against CAFTA), the GOCR has no intention of changing its plans. The CAFTA ratification process would continue. Trejos and labor union leaders acknowledged that the February 26 event likely ended the march-and-rally phase of the fight against CAFTA. However, Trejos, voiced concerns of possible violence by radical elements if the government ignored the call of the street and proceeded anyway with CAFTA. Public sector union leader Albino Vargas was more blunt, repeating his (now familiar) refrain that only through national strikes and "a referendum in the streets," can the "unconstitutional" and "illegitimate" CAFTA ratification be halted.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) The February 26 events did soften the face of the anti-CAFTA protests, but that was all. The GOCR emerged with the upper hand, and can concentrate now on overcoming the challenges and delays to CAFTA inside the legislature. Ironically, the anti-CAFTA bloc's earlier constitutional challenge to CAFTA fast track rules probably absorbed some of the energy from this protest. Instead of taking place with a ratification vote imminent, the march took place as CAFTA supporters and opponents were waiting for a Supreme Court decision on the proposed legislative rules. The opposition, hoped for best case scenario, a public display of overzealous police suppression of protesters, failed to materialize, due to foresight and planning by the Ministry of Security. Call this a strategic victory for the Arias Administration.

WEITZENKORN